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Book review:

Elsphet Probyn (2016) *Eating the Ocean*. Durham and London: Duke University Press

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Elsphet Probyn (2016) *Eating the Ocean*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Elsphet Probyn's *Eating the Ocean* is an intervention into food politics, actualized through a comprehensive account of complex human-fish entanglements. The book is a recommendable piece for any reader interested in seafood politics, providing an intriguing journey to the entanglement of human and more-than-human life forms both under the surface of the ocean and terra firma. With its strong feminist approach, Probyn's book brings a refreshing sea breeze to the valuable work already existing about fish food politics (for example Flick, Ankenman Granata & Martin, 2012; Greenberg, 2010). Stories of humans living with, catching, farming, producing, consuming, eating and standing up for blue fin tuna, oysters, herring, sardines, menhaden, seaweed and anchovies become practical processes of becoming more-than-human in the pages of the book.

What makes Probyn's book stand out from other contributions studying the complex world of fish food politics is Probyn's engagement with a 'wet ethnography' – 'wet in the doubled sense of being a soft ethnographer who dredges ocean tales' – which she continues by stating: 'I tease out connections and relate to them' (p. 14). Indeed, her affective engagement in the stories of people, political systems, and the ocean with its manifold inhabitants through the process of preparing the book becomes evident for the reader. Probyn beautifully expresses how 'a hope for an affective oceanic habitus' (p. 11) works as a thread across the book.

Probyn's book relates fish and humans through five main themes. Three of these themes are reserved for a detailed exploration of the specific inhabitants of the oceans and their histories with humans – oysters, tuna and little fish in all their valuable varieties. From the two remaining, the first chapter – *An Oceanic Habitus* – creates a seabed for the ensemble of the book, based largely on Probyn's central contention that 'we need to desimplify the sea and engage viscerally with her multiple elements' (p. 43). In this chapter, Probyn discusses the

generation of care for the ocean and her inhabitants, and how modeling ‘a more-than-human entanglement that is expansive and affecting’ (p. 43) helps to achieve this goal: if we consider fish being the answer for feeding the growing human population, we really need to eat with the ocean, or at least eat it well. As a small yet important notion, Probyn’s way of captivating the embodied nature of affect through her example of seasickness makes an impression on the reader.

In the second of the two remaining, chapter 4, *Mermaids, Fishwives, and Herring Quines*, Probyn takes the reader on a journey exploring the queer nature of the ocean. This chapter is tensely about gendering the more-than-human. It is here where Probyn’s own genealogy as a queer feminist gets to blossom, guiding the reader to ‘recover the lost stories of the women who have followed fish’ (p. 12). The chapter reflects strongly the affective relation of Probyn with the stories she has engaged with during the process of the book. In regard of the ensemble of the book, the chapter is placed spot-on; the previous chapters have hitherto prepared the reader for the mesh of fish-human-relations. Chapter 4 also alleviates the weight of the dark dimensions of the global fish industry when considered from animal ethics perspective. This is done in practice with a focus on women’s stories and cultural representations of the mermaids, coupled with valuable discussions of gender as representations and social operations. This change of focus is particularly welcome to a vegan reader.

While the book engages oceanic inhabitants’ stories with human history and politics throughout, in chapters 2, 3 and 5 Probyn focuses on specific more-than-human subjects to make room for an affective oceanic habitus. Here her request for opening oneself up for the complex relations between fish, people and the ocean also sets a challenge to the reader. This challenge stems from the need to tolerate, to understand and stay away from any simplifications leading to moral positionings that do not really *do* anything or take the reader anywhere. This

is perhaps more easily said than done because Probyn's book embodies the complexity it aims to highlight of the nature of marine food politics. This becomes tangible for the reader through the seeming juxtapositions that Probyn sets forth throughout the book: the combination of bloody decks of fishing boats, small oceanic creatures being ripped from the ocean and stuffed into containers to be sold in fish markets, heroic women doing the hard work in the fishing industry, culinary moments of enjoying a delicious oyster and moments of flirting with elderly tuna barons disturbs, confuses, yet elucidates the complexity that Probyn underlines. Probyn decisively takes the reader again and again to consider the 'scalar intricacy and metabolic intimacies' and the 'worlds of fish relatedness' (p. 130). Through this continuous re-introducing of complexity, it becomes possible for Probyn to talk about her penchant for oysters while simultaneously discussing the many problematics inherent in their production for food.

Still, at times the affective and culinary relation of Probyn to some oceanic inhabitants, especially oysters, appears disturbing. Despite Probyn's apparent great respect towards these sensing and feeling creatures, they still are perhaps too easily represented as a delicacy that Probyn savors with great delight. While recognizing that this most evidently is not the case, the almost sensual descriptions of 'tonguing' an oyster (p. 59) creates a confusion within the reader not familiar with or willing to eat an oyster. Probyn makes an interesting notion when stating that (referring to Annemarie Mol's [2008, p. 28] argument of interaction of eater and object): "'When I eat an oyster", it also becomes clear that "an oyster eats me"' (p. 11). Regarding this form of fleshly entanglement as mutual yet seems to escape a fundamental disparity between the agents in this episode: who is it that is able to decide who gets to eat, and whom? Probyn continues to describe oysters as 'a marvelous sustainable and hardworking marine entity that is also delicious to eat' (p. 11). Reading these descriptions causes an inner conflict. Because of the disparity between the oyster and the human eating it, this 'rare instance when live flesh meets live flesh' (pp. 11-12) is necessarily based on the type of relating that

makes human mastery peremptory and the oyster bodies simply consumable. Here, in the end, oysters relate with humans only through their value as flesh-to-be-eaten. Thus, while being convinced by the complexity of ‘matter in relation’ (Abrahamsson *et al.* 2015, pp. 9-10; Probyn, 2016, p. 157), a conflict remains. It is present also in ways Probyn discusses the important efforts made by Patricia Majluf to get people to eat Peruvian anchoveta instead of them taken to reduction factories and then by boats to China to feed other fish in gigantic fish farms (p. 144). She states in page 157: ‘Now some of those little fish do not end up pulped as meal and oil, matter fit only to feed to animals and other fish. They are instead “(re)valued as foodstuffs...as (re)formed food” (Coles and Hallett, 2013: 157)’. Here, the reader confronts a question: when the anchovies are here ‘elevated’ from industrial fodder to ‘foodstuff’, is that the only value that they really deserve?

Probyn describes one interesting personal ethical clash in her relation with oceanic inhabitants raised for food at the end of chapter three. Here, the ethical re-consideration of eating, and interacting with, Bluefin tuna stems from Probyn’s experience of swimming with these creatures. The reader becomes intensely engaged with the short reflection of the encounter of Probyn and the Bluefin tuna raised for food in pens in page 97. As a reader, I was left longing for more of that type of affective, embodied, ethically driven discussion of encounters with oceanic inhabitants that are based on other ways of relating than the one of humans eating them. This would be a consideration of the oceans’ inhabitants as subjects entitled to varying modes of care – not only guided by the motivation to produce them as food. Especially with Probyn’s relation to oysters, this viewpoint remains shadowed. The consideration of the oceanic inhabitants as living and sensing subject available for suffering only seems to become ‘fleshy’ and tactile in the case of the large Bluefin tuna swimming around and around in pens.

The last chapter – *Little Fish* – is crucial to the book. It gives the center stage to those little inhabitants of the oceans whose essential role in the marine ecosystem is astonishingly simplified in the global food industry. This is the case of menhaden that are placed on the lowest level on International Fishmeal and Fish Oil Association's ranking: 'Reduced to their "vital nutrients", the menhaden seep into other spheres, becoming the basis for industrial pig feed, pet food, and of course fish farming' (p. 140). Probyn importantly describes the complex entanglement of menhaden and multiple other life forms in the oceans with the help of valuable literature on the topic, and connects it successfully to the marketing messages of the massive Omega Protein Corporation. This allows – forces – the reader to grasp the acute problematics in removing menhaden from their ecosystem and the ways the big players in the fishing industry just do not seem to care about the consequences. Fish used as an intermediate, a resource, ripped out of their value as living and valuable beings in the ecosystem that they are a crucial part of, to be crushed or pulped in order for them to feed other animals, to be then fed to humans, creates anger within the reader, as well as a motivation to act.

The complexity of the book reaffirms its nature as athwart (Helmreich, 2009; Sedgwick, 1993) – mixing, disconcerting, crossing disciplines and geographic borders. In order to discuss an utmost complex and encompassing topic, Probyn allows much space to descriptions of the histories and politics of human-fish entanglements coupled with year- and numeric data. Some parts of the book required more patience than others, and at some point all the facts created an information overload. In these moments, the reader finds comfort in being re-introduced to the theoretical concepts flowing throughout the book.

In the conclusion, the reader is reminded of what is perhaps the most disturbing thing of all: the efforts of the more-than-human subjects trying to escape, or being cooked and displayed for the entertainment and comfort of humans in the Sydney Fish Market. These visions haunt

me as a reader, like the Bluefin tunas haunted Probyn when once swimming with them. With the emotional whirlwind that I experienced in the conclusion, it appeared hard to concentrate on the people getting their money from their relation to fish, oysters and abalones. I just keep thinking about the creatures trying to get out of it all. These affectual responses to Probyn's descriptions manifest the entanglement of any reader of the book to these creatures of the sea – even when not directly consuming them. We all remain at least the witnesses of their use for human consumption, taking part in the processes even though we might be reluctant to do so. This is something we cannot simply vote against with our forks, as Probyn underlines.

It is the very disturbance with which I want to conclude this review. It is delineated in this piece of text:

*'Combining an appreciation for that indifference with a desire to learn,
to relate the stories of others, is to be athwart the ocean and her dependents –
human and fish alike.
It's not a particularly comfortable position,
but it brings with it a sense of awe, of wonder,
and I hope the desire to learn more about our fish-human-entanglement.'*
(Elsphet Probyn, *Eating The Ocean*, p. 21)

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